

Local drug warriors moonlight in U.S. 'War on Terror'

Maj. Tommy S. King is executive officer of the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy at Naval Air Station Meridian. An engineering officer with the Mississippi Army National Guard's 114th Area Support Group of Hattiesburg, he lives in Meridian and has worked at the RCTA for 11 years.

Tommy is active with the Boy Scouts of America. He and his wife, Charlyn, have three children — Shane, 18, Ryan, 10, and Amelia, 6.

He wrote this story in December to honor RCTA staff members who have left their homes in Lauderdale County to serve their country in Iraq.

By Tommy S. King
special to The Star

Nestled in a corner of Naval Air Station Meridian, the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy — or "RCTA" — has grown into the nation's premier counterdrug law enforcement training center.

Over the past 13 years, more than 25,000 state and local police officers have received the very best training available in combating the life-destroying plague of illegal drugs.

Success in any endeavor doesn't just happen; it requires the commitment and dedication of real people. The RCTA is an

excellent example of what can be achieved with talented and committed people — in this case, soldiers and airmen of the Mississippi National Guard.

That's right, for 13 years, 30-plus Mississippi Guardsmen have given their all to build a training facility unequalled in quality or impact in the war on drugs.

A new mission

Now these same Guardsmen are eagerly answering the call to wage another similarly important war — against terror. These Guardsmen that have meant so much to the success of the RCTA, to law enforcement, and to Meridian, all belong to various units throughout the state, and deploy with their units when called upon.

Many have deployed and returned, some will soon be returning, and some are just beginning their journey. In all, 20 members of the RCTA staff have deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Noble Eagle.

The mission continues, but the people are sorely missed.

Currently deployed RCTA staff members are: Technical Sgt. Jeff Tullos, Sgt. 1st Class Dave Labotka, Staff Sgt. Sid Porter, and Sgt. 1st Class Earl Davis.

RCTA staff serving in the Middle East

Jeff Tullos: Technical Sgt. Jeff Tullos deployed to Kuwait in

September 2004 as a member of the 186th Air Refueling Wing.

Jeff has been with the RCTA since February 2002, and has made a tremendous impact as a training coordinator. In this capacity, he is the link between the contract trainers and the law enforcement students — a heavy responsibility, handled in an outstanding and professional manner.

We're looking forward to Jeff's return, as is his 12-year-old son, T.J.

Dave Labotka: Sgt. 1st Class Dave Labotka is preparing to deploy with the 155th Infantry Brigade in the coming days. He embodies the term "selfless service." This is his second deployment in this engagement, having previously served in Uzbekistan with 113th MP Company.

Dave is a food service supervisor with the 150th Combat Engineer Battalion in Meridian. At the RCTA, Dave is a registration point-of-contact, responsible for recruiting and the administrative processing of many of the students attending our classes.

For anyone familiar with a recruiting, training or educational environment, the following statistic will be meaningful: Dave achieved a fill rate in excess of 99 percent for all courses under his responsibility, equating to more than 1,000 students each year.

Hard shoes to fill, but we're trying.

Sid Porter: Staff Sgt. Sid Porter is on his way to the Middle East with the 184th

UNCLE SID

Haley Porter, a fifth-grader at Newton County Elementary School, drew this picture of her uncle, Staff Sgt. Sid Porter of Naval Air Station Meridian's Regional Counterdrug Training Academy. He is currently deployed in Iraq. "I am really proud of him for serving our country and defending our freedoms," Haley said. "I pray for the safe return of my Uncle Sid and all the other service men and women."



Porter

ILLUSTRATION BY HALEY PORTER



Transportation Command Element.

With his unit, Sid is an intelligence analyst. At the RCTA he's an indispensable team player pulling double duty. His primary job is to print and bind the numerous student texts and training aids.

In his "spare time," he assists the computer guys, helping to keep everyone functioning at optimum levels. Sid also organizes and coaches the RCTA softball team each year.

Earl Davis: Sgt. 1st Class Earl Davis has been with the academy since October 2003, helping to maintain and improve the physical training facilities.

Some of the projects he's helped with include constructing

a roof above the breaching wall, remodeling a classroom, and building and installing window closures for the buildings at the Urban Training Site.

Earl is a member of the 150th Combat Engineer Battalion, deploying with the 155th Infantry Brigade.

I feel great pride and admiration for each of these individuals who have contributed so much to our community and state — and now to our nation.

The personal sacrifices required in leaving families behind for an uncertain future is staggering. Yet each of these men understands the necessity of his duty and accepts it with pride and courage. We all look forward to their safe return.

Bragging rights

The Meridian Star asked these sophomores at Southeast Lauderdale High School, "Do you know a Guardsman, a Reservist or a member of the active-duty military who deserves a pat on the back?" These students answered the call and submitted "Bragging Rights" entries to "Profile 2005: A Letter from Home."

"I want to brag on David Landrum because he graduated from high school and joined the Army. After one year of college, he left home and went to Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg. From Hattiesburg, he will leave and go to California for shots and then he will leave and go to

Georgia.

"He will be deployed from Georgia to Iraq, where he will be on the ground for 18 months. I want him to know that his family loves him and to keep his heart up. Also, I want him to put his trust in God and know that everything is going to be OK. I will continue to pray that he and the other troops have a safe return — and soon."



Landrum

Ki'Andrea Moss

"I want to brag on Lonnie Smith, my cousin, because

Lonnie is a soldier in the Army. He was sent to Georgia to prepare before going to the war in Iraq. They told him that he was going to be in Iraq for a total of six months. As he went willingly to the war, leaving behind his wife, he fought for our country — not knowing that soon six months would turn into a year. I would like to honor my cousin for his bravery, courage and faith that he had to live on while in Iraq."

Brittany Butler

"I want to brag on Wayne James because he has served on-and-off in the military all of his life. He is a master sergeant in the 186th Air Refueling Wing in Meridian. He works in telephone maintenance, installing telecommunication equipment and land networks.

"He still loves his country

now just as much as he did when he entered the draft at the age of 18. He believes that the war in Iraq is a good opportunity to give a nation the same freedoms we have. Mr. James has a great sense of patriotism and a good sense of humor. He is a very caring individual and a big asset to the Southeast Lauderdale community."

Josh Davidson

"I want to brag on my brother, Adam Roberts, because he is in the U.S. Air Force and is currently training other fighter pilots. He is not only very good at what he does for a living, he is also an excellent friend to have when I want to go hunting or fishing. He has taught me almost everything I know about the outdoors."

Josh Gwinn

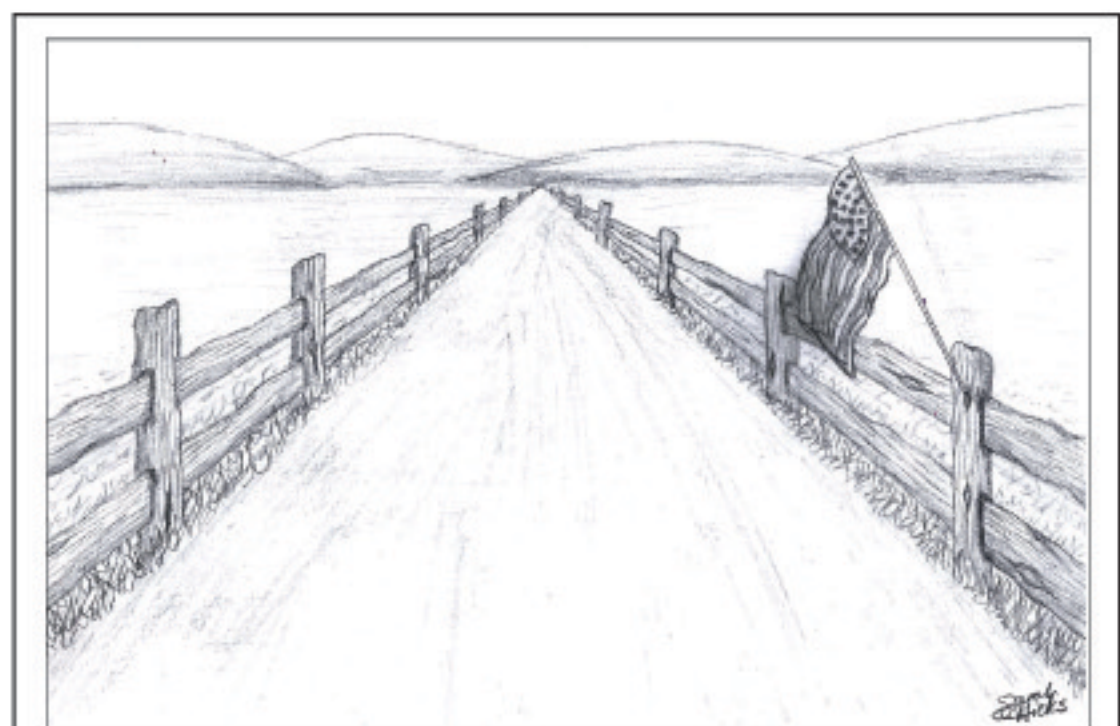


ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH HICKS

A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Sarah Hicks is a freshman at Lamar School. Her parents are Randall and Karen Hicks and she has two brothers, 19-year-old Daniel and 7-year-old Christopher. The family attends First Baptist Church. Sarah enjoys playing and listening to music, especially piano music. She plans to pursue a career in marine biology. Here's what she wrote about her drawing: "I chose to draw this picture because it is a scene that I remember seeing not long after Sept. 11. It symbolizes that although there is a long road ahead, the American flag and what it represents stand strong and do not waver."



Hicks